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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

In the last part of '91, three big grocery chains and a smaller local chain, matched a battle over in San Angelo. It was so intense, discount coupons and bow tops looked like they were going to have a street value.

Traffic on Vienna sausages and dish soaps was making the futures on fat cattle and pork bellies resemble a beginner's game of Monopoly. Had there been any mom and pop operations left in the city (and there might have been four or five straggles hiding out in an obscure neighborhood), mother and dad would have had mighty slim pickings to divide at the end of the longest day.

By Christmas, grand openings and manager's sales fired the flames of commerce, until the local chain became too excited, on one week's time it bought two new stores and closed an old one.

For hombres running a one-stool, one-dish kitchen like myself, all this hub-bub was difficult to manage. The aisles were clogged by shoppers matching bargains to coupons back to the big handicapping sheets of specials. Whether to stiff-arm your way, or stoop under the raised elbows was a spur of the moment choice, especially when the opponent was successfully defending four feet of floor space.

However, I caught on to avoiding the danger spots where kids were rolling in the flour sacks, or ethnic clans were conferring with their translators. In the check-out lanes, I learned to see that the lead customer didn't have so many four-bit certificates on Jell-O pudding that in the delay the man behind him might change his strategy on where to place his Mystery Island card in the week's bean bag contest.

Huge savings are still going on in the wool capital. Advertising agencies, I'm sure, are ascetic. One big chain is moving out of town. I'm thankful my grandfather didn't leave us a grocery store to go with the ranch.